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Tunisia

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

2010 Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

Approved By:
Hassan F. Ahmed, U.S. Embassy, Rabat
Prepared By:
Youssef Chahed, U.S. Embassy, Tunis

Report Highlights:

New legislation concerning the use, marketing and importation of biotech products in Tunisia was delayed by further internal government reviews. The new legislation is not expected to be finalized and adopted before the end of 2010. Meanwhile, imports of biotech products into Tunisia continue to be handled in the same manner as conventional products. FAS Tunis continues to assist in building Tunisia's biotechnology research capacity through exchange programs and technical workshops. A Tunisian researcher participated in biotechnology training at Oklahoma State University under the Norman Borlaug program in June 2009. A workshop on biotech targeting policy-makers and opinion leaders will be jointly organized by FAS and Embassy Tunis PAO in September 2010.

Section I. Executive Summary:

Tunisia currently has no legal framework dealing with the use and release of products of agricultural biotechnology. New legislation on biotech products were expected to be finalized and adopted by the parliament before the end of 2010. However, it seems that this legislation will be further delayed due to the lack of consensus among Tunisian policy-makers, influenced by the EU position on GMO issues. Until the adoption of a legal framework, the imports of biotech products into Tunisia continue to be treated the same way as the conventional agricultural products. Tunisian officials recognize the existence of GMO materials in imported animal feed, however the dependence of Tunisian agriculture on these imports, as well as the Tunisian consumer's lack of awareness of international GMO acceptance issues, has allowed this situation.

Tunisia agricultural biotechnology activities continue to be restricted to the research level covering applications related to plants, animals and insects. There is government support provided to several biotechnology research institutes that have emerged in Tunisia in recent years allowing the improvement of Tunisia's understanding of biotechnology issues at the researchers' level.

FAS Tunis conducted several activities aimed at building close relationships with key players in Tunisia. In the past few years, Post sponsored several seminars and supported Cochran program candidates on biotech training. Overall, Post has been successful with such activities in establishing good working relations with key players in the Tunisian research institutions. In June 2009, FAS sponsored a Tunisian researcher under the Norman Borlaug program with a six-week research program focusing on small grain production and weed management practices. In September 2010, FAS will conduct an outreach activity in coordination with the U.S. Department of State that would target policy-makers and opinion leaders, administration officials, legislators, and civil society leaders to help ensure the formulation of viable biotechnology legislations in Tunisia.

Section II. Plant Biotechnology Trade and Production:

Tunisia is a net importer of agricultural products. In 2009, the United States exported $180 million of agricultural and food products to Tunisia, compared to $183 million in 2008. Historically, Tunisian primary imports were coarse grain and wheat. In 2009, U.S. soybeans exports (together with soybean oil and soy meal) were the most important items among all U.S. agricultural exports to Tunisia. U.S. exports of soybeans, soybean meal and oil were estimated at $121 million in 2009, about 67 percent of all U.S. agricultural and food products exports to this market. The rest of imports included corn, wheat and corn oil.

Tunisia agricultural biotechnologies uses are limited to three domains of application: plants, animals, and insects. The activities involving biotechnologies such as the production of GMOs and recombinant DNA are restricted to the structures of research. Field-testing and, a fortiori commercial use, are on hold pending the enactment of national bio-safety regulations.

There is no segregation concerning commodity trade, as both biotech and non-biotech products are handled the same way and no existing law restrict, control or authorize biotech products trade. A recent study published by the Tunisian Ministry of Health demonstrated that human alimentation in Tunisia was free of GMO while animal feed contain a high level of GMO, principally imported corn and soybean meal.

Section III. Plant Biotechnology Policy:

Tunisia was a signatory country of the protocol of Cartagena since 2003, however there is currently no legal framework dealing with the use and release of products of agricultural biotechnology in Tunisia. Two ministries are primarily involved in GMO issue, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment and

Sustainable Development. The Ministry of Health is also involved via its agency, ANCSEP, which is in charge of sanitary and environmental controls of imported goods.

Today, Tunisia is at a crossroads on biotechnology policy. Most of the Tunisian policy-makers see agricultural biotechnologies as useful in addressing the country's chronic agricultural problems such as crop disease, weeds, and irregularity of rainfall. A draft law currently under consideration would establish a legal framework for the importation, commercialization, and usage of biotechnology in agriculture. However, these efforts may be compromised by skepticism on the use of biotechnology, a reflection of Tunisia's close ties with Europe. The draft of Tunisia's bio-safety regulations has not yet been finalized. The new legislation is reportedly made up of two laws (a draft law related to the confined use, deliberate release, and commercialization of biotech products and a draft law related to the import and transit of biotech products), three decrees and three ministerial orders. One of the main provisions of these draft regulations would be the obligation to apply for an authorization prior to importing biotech products into Tunisia. Several laboratories seem to have the potential to carry out GMO testing using PCR-based detection methods, once legislation is in place. It is worth noting that Tunisia is receiving technical assistance from the EU to establish its GMOs testing capacity and that the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Application (ISAAA) is planning to open a regional Biotechnology Information Center (BIC) to be hosted by the ICARDA's office in Tunis.

It must be noted that concerning labeling, Tunisia published a decree in September 3, 2008 (Art. 7) that makes labeling mandatory for all foods and food ingredients containing GMO.

On the research side, GOT implemented a fully supportive policy for agricultural biotechnology. In 2008 a national laboratory for GMO detection and a research center to assess the risks of using GMO were established. Moreover, GOT's encouragement of biotechnological research contributed to the development of the state of knowledge of Tunisian laboratories' teams. Today, a dozen major institutes conduct biotech research. They are either institutes working under the umbrella of IRESA (Institution of Research and Higher Education) of the Ministry of Agriculture, such as INRAT (Institut National de Recherche Agronomique de Tunisie), or under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Scientific Research and Technology, such as the Center of Biotechnology in Sfax (CBS) or the Center of Biotechnology of Borj Cedria (CBBC). New molecular biology technologies as viral genome isolation, gene cloning, transformation methods, and functional genomics are now established in these laboratories. Several agricultural biotechnologies either at the experimental stage or at the commercial stage such as micro-propagation techniques are now used. The latter are widely used to generate disease-free or salinity tolerant planting material mainly for wheat, citrus, date palm and grapevine

Section IV. Plant Biotechnology Marketing Issues:

There are no significant market acceptance issues related to the sale of biotech products in Tunisia due to the non-existence of food-use GMOs on one hand, and the absence of strong consumer movements pushing trade-restrictive agendas on the other hand.

Consumers continue to be largely unaware of the controversial debate between proponents and opponents of biotech at the international level. The biotech debate has not yet reached the public arena although we see from time to time newspaper articles conveying the EU concerns about modern biotechnology. A recent local inquiry showed that only 4 percent Tunisians heard about GMO issues.

Who could draw to use GMOs in Tunisia?

Large scale farmers in Tunisia would likely be interested by GMOs since their adoption will reduce the costs brought by the use of pesticides and irrigation. Moreover the use of GM plants resistant to diseases, salinity or

drought would be profitable considering that a reduction of the cost of treatments and an improvement of the yield would be obtained. However the question arises for small-scale farming (less than 20 ha) which represents a majority of the total number of the farms in Tunisia. In such farms, cereal seeds are simply taken out of the previous harvest and no pesticide or herbicide treatments are applied because of their costs. Consequently the use of GMOs would be possible only through governmental support by subsiding transgenic seeds for example.

Section V. Plant Biotechnology Capacity Building and Outreach:

The FAS office in Tunis supports local interest in biotechnology by developing several activities under an overall FAS regional strategy. Post activities have been focused on identifying key players and on advocating science-based biotech risk assessments and trade-friendly regulations. We have been successful in establishing relationships with key officials; some of them are influential members of the National Biosafety Committee. FAS will continue promoting exposure and increased familiarity of Tunisian regulators and scientists with biotechnology.

Norman E. Borlaug Fellowship program

Under this program, a Tunisian researcher from CBBC participated in June 2009 in a six-week training program at Oklahoma State University. The program will help the Tunisian researcher to improve its knowledge of small grain production and to gain exposure to the latest U.S weed management practices. In addition the program will provide the opportunity for Tunisian scientists and policymakers to establish long-term contacts with U.S. scientists and apply the newly gained knowledge from U.S. laboratories to their research and development programs.

Cochran Program

In the past 10 years, Post conducted several Cochran programs focusing on giving government key officials an enhanced understanding of commercial realities in the US, so they do not impose restrictive regulations. The last Cochran program exclusively devoted to Biotech was in 2001.

Conferences and others activities

- FAS will join efforts with the Public Affairs Office at Embassy Tunis to sponsor three U.S. experts to travel to Tunisia to give presentation, visits research centers, conduct roundtable discussions and a workshop in September 2010. This activity, which is funded by the U.S. Department of State, will target policy-makers and opinion leaders, administration officials, legislators and civil society leaders to help ensure the formulation of viable biotechnology legislations in Tunisia.
- Post sponsored several conferences and workshops having led, among other outcomes, to supportive articles in local media. An article, for instance, posted in a widely circulated daily newspaper featured a headline mirroring the US position in using modern biotech to alleviate hunger and malnutrition.
- The agricultural specialist led a delegation of 10 Tunisian risk assessors to attend a 3-day FAS risk assessment workshop in Morocco.
- Post placed a cleared op-ed in local media under the ambassador's signature explaining reasons having led the U.S. to file a WTO case against the EU's moratorium on approving agricultural biotechnology products.

Section VI. Animal Biotechnology:

Animal biotechnologies are at their early stages except for basic reproductive biotechnologies such as artificial insemination. Embryo transfer, although technically feasible, has not yet gained a significant uptake in the livestock sector.

Section VII: Reference Material

Appendix I

Following are the main regulations governing the import of seeds and seedlings, unprocessed food and feed, consumer-oriented products, and GMO labeling**:**

(1) Seeds and seedlings imports must comply with Decree # 2002-621 dated March 19th, 2002. This decree sets rules to import all seeds and seedlings. Apart from the phytosanitary aspects, the main provisions of this decree are the obligation for the importer to apply for a license, to have a minimum storage capacity and to keep records for its inventories. Seeds and seedlings covered by this decree are: potato, citrus, strawberry, pulses, horticultural seeds, forages, cereals and vine.

(2) Unprocessed food and feed: the existing sanitary and phytosanitary rules do not refer to the biotechnology aspects. In Tunisia, phytosanitary control of imported food and feed is regulated by the Law # 92-72 dated August 3rd 1992, while sanitary control is covered by the Law # 99-24 dated March 9th, 1999. The enforcing authorities are the DGPCQPA (Direction Generale de la Protection et du Controle de la Qualite des Produits Agricoles) and DGSV (Direction Generale des Services Veterinaires), both departments within the Ministry of Agriculture.

(3) Consumer-oriented food products: Apart from the sanitary and phytosanitary laws that apply also to this type of product, consumer-oriented products must comply with the decree dated July, 1985 validating Tunisian standard NT 15-23 (1983) which applies to pre-packed food commodities labeling and presentation. The enforcing authority is the DQPC (Direction Generale de la Protection du Consommateur) of the Ministry of Commerce.

(4) Food labeling: Article 8 of the decree published by the Ministry of trade in 2008 concerning labeling of Foods and Food Ingredients oblige producers to mention clearly in the label GMO presence in the product. This article is not clear since there is no GMO production in Tunisia.